The Sport of Vikings

By
WILLIAM WILLARD HOWARD

IF it so happens that the reader wants to witness a real, sure enough race between sailing vessels — blow high, blow low, and Davy Jones take the hindmost—he has only to journey to the ancient and honorable fishing port of Gloucester, on Cape Ann, in the State of Massachusetts, on or before the twelfth day of next month, for, on that day there will be begun the trial race to select America's representative in the race for the Fishermen's International Challenge cup.

It might be well to go a little before the twelfth, unless the visitor is willing to take a chance at sleeping on a bolt of canvas in Cooney's sail loft, or some such place; for, assuredly, on race days the friendly and hospitable city of Gloucester, from Eastern Point clear around the horseshoe harbor to the Reef of Norman's Woe, will be filled to the deck beams with strangers from far and near. The race committee, assisted by the Mayor and Chamber of Commerce has been busy for several weeks making up lists of spare rooms in private houses, but, even at that, the late arrivals may find every available sleeping place occupied by men, women and children from the Maritime Provinces of Canada.

It might be well, also, for the visitor to make up his mind in advance to be content with salt codfish, canned lobster and New England boiled dinners, instead of the new caught fish that he naturally might look forward to in Gloucester; because no red blooded fishermen can be expected to waste time in futile fishing when the blue ribbon of the Grand Banks is on the knees of the gods.

For this Fishermen's International Challenge Cup Race is a race of "bankers"—deep sea fishing schooners that go half a thousand miles off shore at all seasons of the year; in fog and rain and snow and ice, howling gales and Arctic cold—a race between grown men, who never are quite so happy and carefree as when the lee rail is out of sight and the green seas wash a foot deep over the main hatch, and the cook sings out: "There won't be no table set; you boys go snug up th' best you kin."

Better ships and better men never have sailed the seven seas—not even in the old days, when tall ships out of Salem traded for ivory on the coasts of Africa, or carried Yankee notions to the far shores of China. I will ask you to believe that I know what I am talking about because, during the past eighteen years my own sailing ships, manned mostly by Gloucester fishermen, have fought and conquered hurricanes in the West Indies; buffeted ice and snow and raging seas along the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland, and fled for days and nights, under bare poles before a repetition of the gale in which the Apostle Paul was wrecked in the Mediterranean long and long ago. I know the quality of Gloucester ships and the quality of Gloucester men.

The flower of the north Atlantic fishing fleet will win the race—no less. Seven or eight schooners probably will enter the trial races, each vessel manned by thirty weather bronzed, highly skilled deep sea fishermen—chosen with care and deliberation from among thousands of eager volunteers. No favoritism, no claim of friendship, no tie of relationship will influence the selection of the racing crews. Each man will be chosen on his merits.

It must be done that way; for, look you, the ship that is coming down from Canada to do battle for the cup will take a lot of beating. Nothing must be left to chance or favor if we are to go out and mop up thirty miles of the north Atlantic Ocean with that gang of clear eyed, hard fisted able seamen that will come from Lunenburg with the determination to shake the end of a tow line in our faces. At the present moment in Gloucester it is expected that the invading ship will be that justly celebrated schooner Bluenose, concerning which some words of explanation are advisable.

It may be remembered that two years ago Mr. Dennis, a public spirited gentleman who publishes a brace of daily newspapers in Halifax, Canada, put up a cup for an international race between fishing schooners of the Grand Banks fleet and practically dared Gloucester to come and take it away.

Gloucester took it away quite easily by sending Capt. Marty Welch after it in the good old schooner Esperanto, although the Esperanto never had been looked upon as anything extra in the way of speed. Canadians are good losers, as well as good sports; so the Esperanto hardly was hull down in the offing on her voyage back to Gloucester with the cup when the losers in this particular case began planning the construction of several new schooners, any one of which should cause the best Yankee boat to be mistaken for a raft of logs.

I do not know how many vessels the Canadians built, but I do know that out of the welter and spray of their trial races last year there came the Bluenose, a yacht designed schooner built to the extreme limit of the measurement rules, with enormous spars and nearly a third of a square acre of canvas. Bear in mind, please, that the Bluenose was designed by a Canadian yacht designer; that she was built regardless of cost, and that when racing she was stripped down almost to bare poles.

Gloucester did not build anything to meet the Bluenose last year, because with large stocks of high priced fish in her warehouses she was passing through a painful process of readjustment. A Boston syndicate in which Mr. C. W. H. Foster, a well known yachtsman, was a leading member, built the Mayflower from a design by the present day Burgess, a worthy son and successor of Edward Burgess, who preceded Herreshoff as designer of America cup defenders. Like the Bluenose, the Mayflower was built to the extreme limit of the measurement rules—112 feet water line, 145 feet over all and 16 feet draft.

Painful sounds arose in Canada—sounds expressive of protest against the Mayflower on the ground that she was not a genuine fishing schooner. She was asserted to be merely a racing machine, a yacht designed by a yacht designer and built and owned by yachtsmen. Behind this smoke screen of protest lay the undeniable facts that the Bluenose herself came from the drawing boards of a yacht designer, and that on race days she stripped down to naked shrouds.

In spite of all the outcry the Mayflower went out to the Grand Banks and caught fish, wherein she complied fully with all the rules and regulations of the cup committee. That fact, however, made not a bit of difference to the Canadians.

As the time for last year's trial races drew near Mr. Percy C. Parkhurst, president of the Parkhurst Fisheries of Gloucester, asked me to let him enter my schooner Elizabeth Howard in the trials. I consented, but the Gloucester race committee refused to accept the entry, for the reason that the Elizabeth Howard was not a fishing schooner. My vessel had carried cargoes of fish from Labrador and Newfoundland and had voyaged as far from home as Egypt and Turkey, but she never had caught any fish.

The Gloucester race committee then sent to Canada the entry of the Mayflower to represent the United States in the cup race. The Canadians promptly and decisively rejected the Mayflower. That decided the fate of the cup then and there, because, with the Mayflower and the Elizabeth Howard both out, there was not anything in sight that could hope to beat the Bluenose. Although doomed to certain defeat, Gloucester sent Capt. Marty Welch back to Halifax in the little old Elsie, a good boat in her day. The Esperanto probably would have been sent had she been afloat, but she lay atop of a sunken wreck on the sands of Sable Island.

Capt. Marty and his hand picked crew made a gallant fight against the Bluenose. They actually beat the Bluenose off the wind, but when they turned the leeward buoy and came on the wind the big Bluenose romped away from the little Elsie. A good big one always is better than a little one. So the Bluenose won back the cup.

While the Elsie came limping in with a broken topmast, certain men of Gloucester formed a syndicate then and there and pledged themselves to build an honest fishing schooner that should be fleet enough to show the Bluenose the way all around the course. The Burgess designed Puritan was built and was sent to the Grand Banks last April. At the same time Capt. Clayton Morrissey brought out his new schooner Henry Ford. The Yankee, a smaller vessel, came out; so that Gloucester had three new candidates for cup honors. It was reported that in one of those impromptu races that occasionally are held half a thousand miles from the home port the Puritan had beaten the Mayflower decisively. The jubilation in Gloucester over this news was of brief duration. The Puritan tried to push Sable Island off the chart, and so made the port of missing ships. That left only the Henry Ford and the smaller Yankee, with the L. A. Dunton as a sort of runner up—not counting four or five older vessels that may go into the trials simply for the joy of racing.

During the first week of last July Mr. Marion J. Cooney, head of the United Sail Loft, and Mr. Benjamin Pine, owner of a fleet of motor driven fishing schooners and president of the Atlantic Supply Company, suggested that I fit out the Elizabeth Howard as a fisherman and send her to the Grand Banks, so that she might qualify for the trial races.

"What's the use?" I said. "It will cost a lot of time and money, and the race committee will refuse the entry again."

"Leave it to us," they said.

I left it to them. So as I write these lines the good ship Elizabeth Howard is out on the Grand Banks somewhere catching fish. I certainly should enjoy the novel sight of that noble craft with her decks filled to the buffalo rails with flopping codfish.

Despite the rejection of the Mayflower last year, the race committee has accepted her entry for the trial races this year. That makes the list of probable starters something like this: Mayflower, Henry Ford, Yankee, L. A. Dunton, Philip T. Manta, Arthur James, Elizabeth Howard and possibly two or three others that may go in on the theory that you never can tell what will happen in a boat race. In my own opinion, the trial races will be better worth seeing than the cup race itself. At the present moment there is a thrilling uncertainty about the result. Of the boats herein mentioned only the Manta and the James have been in a race. No one knows what the others can do. It is absolutely futile to attempt critical comparisons.

The Mayflower is a big boat, with masts and topmasts so lofty that ordinary shrouds and stays are not enough to hold them rigidly in place. It is feared that the Mayflower's sticks will jump out of her in a whistling nor'easter some winter day. The Mayflower is said to lie over too far in a breeze of wind and to plunge badly in a seaway. But in a moderately smooth sea and light breeze she certainly can travel. I have heard that even last year, when she was new, the Mayflower exceeded the waterline length of 112 feet. Now that she has soaked up a lot of weight outside and inside it is said that she will have to lighten ship by taking out ballast. If that is the case she will be at a disadvantage unless the races are sailed in light airs.

Capt. Clayt Morrissey is about as talkative as a deaf and dumb asylum when it comes to a discussion of the merits of the Henry Ford. All that I could get out of him was: "Any boat is fast when sailing alone." The Henry Ford plunged badly on her first trip to the Banks; but that fault was corrected by shifting some of her pig iron ballast forward. The only criticism that I have heard concerning the Henry Ford is that her greatest beam is considerably forward of her midship section, which gives her a rather wide bow, and a long, tapering run aft—a modern renaissance of the old school of ship designing. Judging by form alone I should say that with started sheets the Henry Ford should travel like a Detroit motor car in high gear. What her broad fore section will do on the wind in a seaway we doubtless shall see. Eastern Point and the Reef of Norman's Woe usually provide an honest fisherman's breeze in October.

But the reader doubtless is less interested in the technical details of these vessels than in some definite indication of their speed. No one knows just how fast they are. The Elizabeth Howard has done sixteen knots an hour in the open sea with a full cargo of salt aboard. I once timed her coming out of Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, in midwinter with only her four lower sails set in a seaway that broke over her bow. Going close hauled, she did four and a half knots in twenty minutes. That is thirteen and a half knots an hour. In the puffs she slid along at sixteen or seventeen. Coming out of the Gulf of Smyrna, Turkey, one January day, bound home in light ballast, she was hit by one of those "Levanters" that wrecked the Apostle Paul. She fled before the gale for forty-eight hours under bare poles, not a square foot of canvas set. For four consecutive hours she did eleven and a half knots an hour by the master's harpoon log.

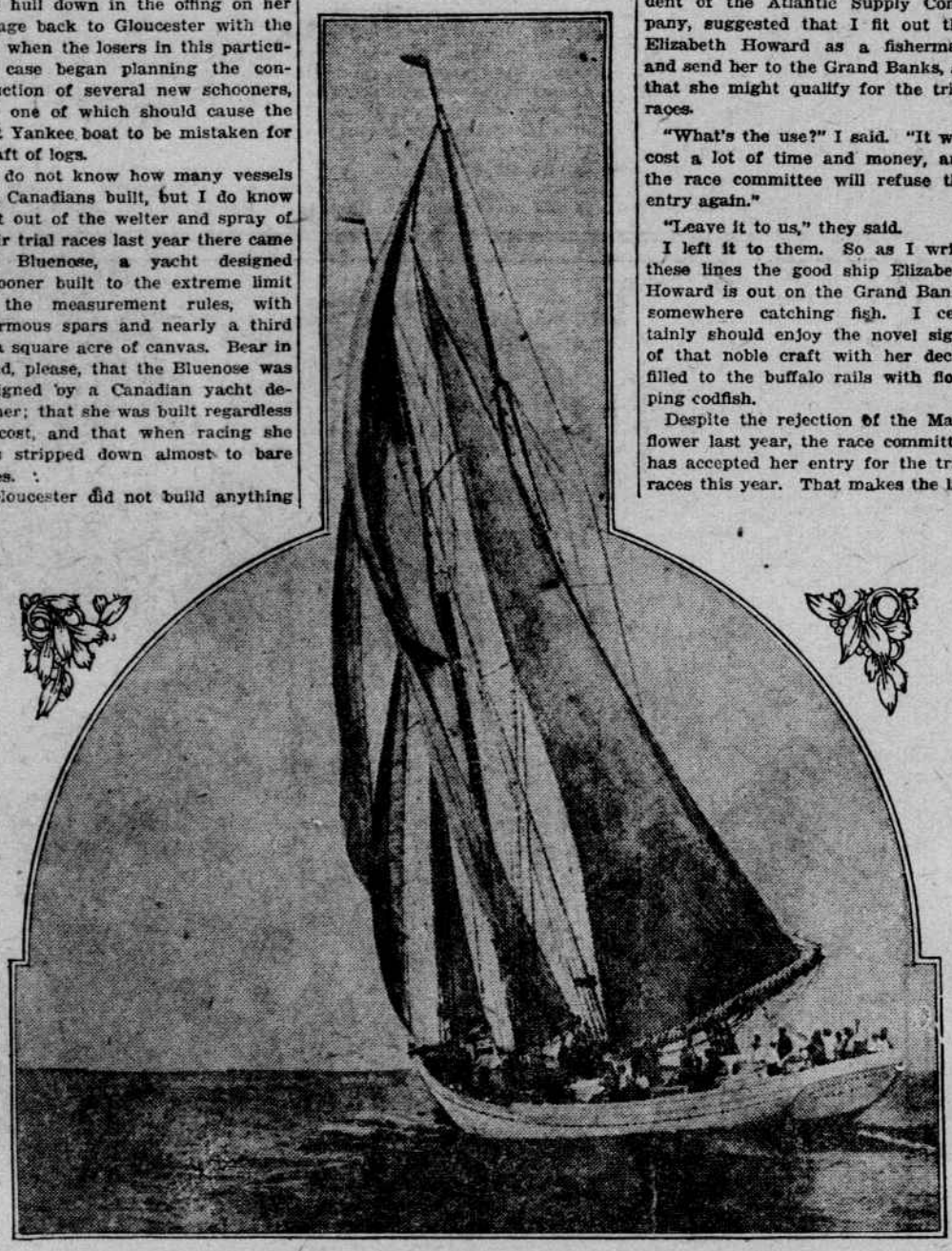
Any comparison between these modern fishing schooners and racing yachts is difficult. The fishermen are much larger than the yachts and more strongly built. The fishermen must go out to the Grand Banks at all seasons of the year and take what comes for months at a time. The racing yachts—even the America cup defenders—may take refuge inside Sandy Hook when Father Neptune rides his white horses on a nor'east gale. A generation or so ago Gloucester schooners went out and raced in a nor'easter when even sturdy steamboats filled with race day enthusiasts came in out of the wet. In that memorable contest the winning boat was keeled over so far that members of her crew sprang over the rail and walked along her weather bilge.

In a race between these fishing schooners and America cup defenders in the average summer weather of Long Island Sound the yachts would win; but out in the open sea, in an honest fisherman's breeze the yachts would not have a Chinaman's chance. The fishing schooners do not carry any outside ballast. They carry usually about a hundred tons of pig iron stowed along the keelson. Outside ballast would snap the sticks out of them in a winter gale on the Grand Banks.

Yachtsmen may get an idea what sort of racing may be seen off Eastern Point next month when I say that the main boom of the Elizabeth Howard is seventy-five feet long, the main gaff forty-eight, and that the main sheet—a Manila rope almost as big around as a mooring line—will not be cleated; it will be held in the hands of the crew. The skipper will not waste any time luffing up to give the crew a chance to haul aft the main sheet; nothing like that. He simply will sing out, "Take a pull on it!" And those red blooded, hard fisted volunteers, who have pulled halliards and sheets and dories and fishing trawls all their lives, will haul in that main sheet, no matter how hard the wind may be trying to tear it out by the roots. Ask these brass bound yachting crews on Long Island Sound how they would like to hold in their hands the main sheet of a seventy-four foot boom for three mortal hours, with cataracts of the icy cold Atlantic Ocean pouring down the backs of their necks—and no time to mug up.

It will be a race between the stanchest, swiftest, finest sailing ships in all the world—ships manned by picked men to whom the fog, the rain, the snow, the gales and the bitter cold of the Grand Banks are merely the incidents of the day's work.

And in bidding you to this rare maritime spectacle—for the first time in a generation—Gloucester will give to you a wholehearted welcome.



Mr. Howard's schooner, the Elizabeth Howard of New York, New York's only entry in the Fishermen's International Cup Trials, October 12 at Gloucester. William Willard Howard is the owner and Marion J. Cooney and Benjamin Pine are managing operators. This photo by Phelps of Gloucester shows the Elizabeth Howard off for the Grand Banks to catch fish.